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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/FO (GRAY AND CARPENTER)  
NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS); NEA/PI  
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/05/2017  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN BAR ASSOCIATION RETAINS INDEPENDENCE

REF: A. 06 TUNIS 730

[1](#)B. 05 TUNIS 1282

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for Reasons 1.4 b & d

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) On July 1, Bechir Essid was elected President of the Tunisian Bar Association. Essid's election was a surprise to many, as the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD) had opposed him and strongly backed other candidates. Other independents were also elected to the Bar Association's Executive Committee, including some with moderate Islamist connections. At a minimum, the elections are a signal that the Bar membership is serious about the association's independence, but it may also reflect growing Islamist/anti-GOT sentiment among Tunisian professionals. End summary.

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Activists Make Strong Showing  
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[1](#)2. (C) The leading candidates for the Bar presidency were the RCD-backed Charfeddine Dhrif and Slaheddine Chokki, Essid (who considers himself a pan-Arab nationalist), and Ibrahim Bouderbala (an independent). Essid was the top vote-getter during the first round of voting. He won the second round with 1193 votes; Dhrif came in second with 1085 votes. Essid was supported by young lawyers and opposition-affiliated attorneys. Mustapha Ben Jaafar, Secretary General of the Democratic Forum for Work and Liberty (FDTL), told the Ambassador on July 2 that despite GOT pressure, the Bar Association managed to have transparent elections and elected an independent candidate as a result. Essid, who was President of the Bar Association from 2001 - 2004, has a history of political activism. Under former President Bourguiba, Essid spent seven years in prison for protesting against the government, as well as five years in prison under President Ben Ali.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Other independents were also elected to positions on the Bar Association's Executive Committee. Islamist lawyer Mohamed Nouri made a strong showing with 134 votes for the Bar presidency, as did moderate Islamist attorney Saida Akremi who was elected to the seven member Bar Association Executive Council with 1033 votes (the second highest number of votes). Their success is probably indicative of a rising number of Islamist lawyers and perhaps, the view that the

Islamists represent a catalyst for change. This is the first time that lawyers close to the banned an-Nahdha party won seats on the Bar Association Executive Council. Members close to the RCD took the remaining five seats on the Executive Council. Leftist lawyers dominated in the past, but disorganization prevented them from winning a seat in the new Council, whose term is three years. Essid announced he will represent all lawyers, regardless of their views or conflicts.

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Why does the RCD Care?  
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¶4. (C) Many Tunisian lawyers are also civil society activists. Over 120 lawyers volunteered to represent political prisoner Mohamed Abbou (see Refs A and B) pro bono during his appeal in 2005. Others are representing the reportedly hundreds of Tunisians that have been arrested by the MOI since January, mostly on terrorism charges. The Bar Association is viewed as an independent institution, as opposed to an RCD-controlled organization. The election of an RCD-supported President would have greatly extended government influence over Bar Association affairs.

¶5. (C) Surprisingly, media sources and civil society contacts estimate that much of Essid's support came from RCD members of the Bar who were annoyed with GOT efforts to control lawyers and hinder the Bar Association from implementing lawyers' agendas. During a July 10 meeting, attorney Slaheddine Chokki (one of the RCD-supported candidates) speculated that the elections were more about sending a message to the GOT than they were about the candidates themselves. While Chokki painted himself as an independent, he said the RCD backed him since he was moderate compared to the other candidates, an affiliation he blames for alienating voters. Without these votes, perhaps more of opposition to the GOT than support, Essid would not have won.

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Comment  
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¶6. (C) The Bar Association, one of the few independent professional organizations in Tunisia, plays an important role in civil society as an advocate for human rights and liberties. This development may also suggest growing and perhaps Islamist anti-GOT sentiment among Tunisian professionals. At a minimum, this suggests a strong desire for an independent Bar Association and something more than the GOT business-as-usual approach to the country's challenges. The election of an independent is a positive step for the association's future, although it is unclear if the new President will be able to implement any major changes. Post is seeking a meeting with the new Bar Association leadership and will report details septel. End Comment.  
GODEC